Soldiers Online

ACCAP Soldiers:

Providing Critical Commo Links

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

HOW often a soldier deploys from the Netherlands depends largely on his job.

For example, for soldiers assigned to the Allied Command, Europe, Communications-Information Systems Contingency Assets Battalion in Maastricht, a rotation to Bosnia typically takes them away for two to six months a year.

It's not atypical for a satellite communication specialist to deploy five months out of a year, said SGT Paul Mayfield, section chief of the VHF radio section.

Mayfield, who's been in the Netherlands since September 1997, has deployed to about eight exercises and an extended tour to Kosovo, he said.

Additionally, he's traveled to France, Spain and the Czech Republic. "I was in Spain for 30 days in the summer, right on the coast," said Mayfield. "It was fantastic."

"We're the initial setup force for communication," said SGM David Carr. "So, the bad thing is that there's typically no support in place when we arrive somewhere."

Engineer technician SSG Michael Pace is a 14-year Army veteran. He's spent 10 years overseas, "but this is the first time I've worked hand-in-hand with soldiers from other countries. My first-line supervisor is Belgian. There are occasional conflicts, because everyone wants to think they're the best. But overall, this is a great assignment, and working with people from other countries offers wonderful insights into their armies and cultures."

Seventy-seven U.S. soldiers comprise the largest contingent of the 289-member unit, whose main mission is transmission-component planning for worst-case scenarios. Those are the ones that require commanders to depend on satellites to communicate from their field headquarters to NATO headquarters.

CIS technicians and operators provide the satellite connections for computers, telephones and teleconferencing. Since 1995, they've provided those services in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania, said the battalion's British commander, Lt. Col. Jim Dryburgh.

"Before there was a KFOR, we provided telephone and automation support, physically taking equipment to Macedonia," Carr added.

ACCAP Bn. soldiers in Maastricht work with soldiers from more than a half-dozen other nations to support NATO communication and information systems.

Communications-Information Systems Contingency Assets Battalion — Engineer Tech

Pace checks the restraints securing an antenna component aboard a truck. The ACCAP Bn. will soon replace its older microwave equipment with more-deployable systems.

"Our present operational commitments require about 65 people at a given time, not all of them in-theater," Dryburgh said. Currently, about 20 of the unit's personnel are in the Balkans.

About one-third of the battalion typically participates in an operation, one-third prepares for a new operation, and the remaining third is returning from an operation, Dryburgh said.

"Today, it's not true to say that we're the lead CIS agency," said Carr. "We're the first, at the operational level, to go into an area for a short time. Then we redeploy as quickly as possible, turning the communications mission over to a commercial agency.

"Our second mission is to provide CIS to the combined joint task force, when AFNORTH participates in a major exercise," Carr said.

In May, soldiers in the unit had just returned from a three-week interoperability training exercise in Baumholder, Germany, where they worked with a new short-range, line-of-sight communication system.

For the unit's U.S. soldiers, working on foreign equipment — and driving foreign vehicles — can be a challenge, Carr said.

Some of them have never seen the Italian, British and Dutch equipment that comes from across the entire NATO defense structure, because there's no standard, international CIS network, Carr added. "Most soldiers will probably never again see some of the equipment they work with here when they leave the unit."

Mayfield — section chief of the VHF Radio Section that includes Belgian, Dutch, British and U.S. Army and Air Force personnel — said the new line-of-sight system, as an example, includes an Italian-made main radio, British VHF base station and an air-ground radio that's built by a U.S. contractor, but isn't in the U.S. military inventory.

"Radio is radio. VHF is VHF. We have to retrain ourselves not to get distracted by all its added gizmos. You take it as it comes," Mayfield said.

"We're in a transitional phase right now," said Carr. "That includes training. In the global information age, industry leads. By the time we find and field equipment, it's already outdated."

But the new line-of-sight system is clearly an improvement over the old. Mayfield said the old system required 11 people to set up. The new one takes three to four people and can be set up in one hour.

It's definitely in keeping with NATO's integrated-force structure of smaller, more versatile units that can deploy faster to crises.

Conventional CIS support overall is being overhauled, Dryburgh said. "We're moving toward a modular CIS system. By 2004 we'll be able to provide a self-sustaining, operational-level deployed headquarters to meet all alliance mission CIS requirements.

"In the future, we'll be able to put a headquarters together much faster using CIS people who have trained and worked together," Dryburgh said. The plan is to provide a sister battalion at AFNORTH and to combine the two units.

"Right now, when a commander wants CIS support he doesn't always know what's available to him. It's like we haven't done the shopping. We may want to make a proper omelet but are limited by what's available in the fridge," Dryburgh said.

In the future, everything will come out of the ACCAP Bn. and its sister battalion at AFNORTH. □

SSG Michael Pace *(right)* works with a Belgian and a German soldier in a communications shelter.

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